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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines

Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to: review_editor@platypus1917.org. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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The **Platypus Review**

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What makes a history Marxist?

An interview with John Rees on *The Leveller Revolution*

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Erin Carbach: How does this book relate to your interview with John Keegs, historian, activist and lead organizer of Counterfire, about his book *The Leveller Revolution and the memory of the English revolution today: the questions were prepared with Richard Rubin. What follows is an edited transcript of the interview. During the interview, Boris Johnson announced the porogation of the British Parliament, provoking comparisons to the English civil war. A postscript on the Brexit political crisis is appended.*

John Rees: I had always been interested in the English revolution, long before I became more generally political. I had a pretty good facsimile reproduction of Leveller organisation into the wider spectrum of radical parliamentarianism?	EC: The central argument in your book is that the Levellers were a distinct political grouping and not just an inconstant wing of the parliamentary party. Why do you think other historians "tend to dissolve Leveller organisation into the wider spectrum of radical parliamentarianism"?
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fascinating and dramatic episode in English history, so I was drawn to it from an early age. In terms of becoming a Marxist, I think I was a Marxist before I joined the Socialist Workers Party (UK). To diminish the role of the explicitly revolutionary wing

EC: When was that?

JR: In the mid-1970s, I went to Portsmouth Polytechnic to do a politics degree. I don't think I joined the SWP until my third year at Portsmouth. I certainly had read Marx's early writings and his political writings, as well as other Marxists before then. I would have considered myself a Marxist in a general way. I knew a lot of SWP members at Portsmouth. I was not a member myself. Sometimes that comes with the thought that the entire effective political force was the revisionists wanted to take them more seriously and to regard them as a more general, this is a moment when it has been possible to re-emphasise and recover interest in the Levels, to long gone among working historians in the area. In revisionist movement and the high tide of revisionism a coherent movement. I think we are now in a post-

college and in Portsmouth generally. On the economics part of my degree a lecturer turned up called Peter Griffiths, who had won the Smithwick constituency in the 1964 general election against Patrick Gordon Walker, the Labour party candidate, with an unofficial Labour vote. "If you want a nigger for a neighbour, vote Labour." Some other Labour party members and I organised a very successful boycott of his lectures, and the SWP members were involved supportively in that. That was the point where I joined the SWP.

Very important way.

actually helped recover the history of the Levelers in a way that the Levelers. However, the work they have done has been to recognise the distinctness and effectiveness of the revisionists, but I think they don't go far enough of the revisionists, and those historians would be quite critical is still a step forward from where we were with the broader perspective, but without necessarily emphasising their organisational or ideological distinctness. That thing and that the Levelers can be placed within that

EC: For Marxists, the English revolution is seen as part of the epoch of bourgeois revolutions. How was the topic of bourgeois revolutions dealt with in the SWP of the late 1970s?

JR: There was never a party line on that kind of question; there were just people who were interested in the levelers that you have.

EC: It seems that the revisionists' neglect of the levelers, if we can put it in political terms, is a right-wing response to minimise the political stakes of the 1640s and 1650s. Yet, clearly, some left-wing and Marxist historians have not placed the same emphasis on the levelers that you have.

JR: Who do you mean?

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parliamentary sovereignty and history. Obviously, if you are a Marxist, you will want to engage with and critique that interpretation. It involves a partial truth, but it has democratic lacunae, in terms of the limits of parliamentary democracy, then and now, and its neglect of plebeians and even the "middling sort" as a driver of historical events. That is obviously where Hill, A. L. Morton and the CP historians came in.

EC: Is a Marxist history, then, the corrective assertion of the plebeian elements in the revolution? One often comes across phrases — in Hill and others — about “social history” or “history from below.”

JR: I never worry about that stuff really, and I don't think Hill or Brian Manning did either. The sensible way to proceed — I think this is how Marx and Engels proceeded — is to develop a methodological view: historical materialism or dialectical materialism,

contemporary material would take me, I didn't want my

go. After you've done that, you can demarcate it and illuminate it by — in a relatively minor way — dealing with other currents and approaches. As far as I am concerned, what makes something Marxist is that it is the application of that method. I have done a lot of work on that in *The Algebra of Revolution: The Dialectic and the Classical Marxist Tradition*.

JR: Whig history is a teleology; Marxism can never be that. Therefore, this book, above all, is to do with political agency and political organization, and what its limits were in those historical circumstances. That is a completely different approach to Whig history. It is not centered on Parliament. I am researching

parliamentary radicals, but this book is not about that. Parliament features only in relation to the broader extra-parliamentary movement.

EC: You mentioned that Whig history is "teleological" and Marxist history isn't. Another term associated with Whig history is "progress." Hill writes, "The Whigs stress the progressive nature of the revolution," but he is also ambivalent about that. He says that the 17th century was progressive, but that he was not "approving." Terms

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the consciousness of Freedom.” The idea of progress in history emerges for the first time with the modern bourgeois revolutions. How do you relate to those ideas, given that critique of Whig history? Is there progress in the 17th century, and if so, what does that mean?

JR: It is always conditional, partial and contradictory. The practical way this often comes out in discussions is about Cromwell and his role in Ireland. Is the Cromwell that formed the Eastern Association, led the New Model Army and said that he would as soon discharge his pistol upon the king “as upon any private man” a progressive figure? Yes, he is. He wanted an end to absolute monarchy and some kind of parliamentary sovereignty — not necessarily a democratic sovereignty. That is a step forward over absolute monarchy. But then people say, “What about Cromwell in Ireland?” You have to ask what kind of progress we are talking about. We are talking about the imposition of another form of minority class rule. As Marx says, all existing movements have been in the interest of minorities. This is one minority replacing another — a capitalist minority replacing a feudal minority — so why would you expect anything else but empire? Parliamentary sovereignty at home and empire abroad: that’s what capitalism does — what one of the better forms of capitalism does, actually. It is obviously going to be a bloody and contradictory form of progress. It is not going to be the emergence of a realm of freedom or an end to exploitation and oppression. In these revolutions that is not the issue, so any form of progress that we talk about is going to be qualified and contradictory. The art is to explain where those contradictions lie, how they came about and how they operated. The defeat of the Levellers by Cromwell is part of that story.

EC: You said that Cromwell is progressive but in contradictory ways, and that there are limits to him. You raised Marx, saying that the new form of rule is a partial class rule. That raises this question of society as a whole. The concept of society as a totality emerges in the modern era of bourgeois revolution for the first time. You reminded me of certain arguments in Hill and Marx. Hill says, “The struggle of the bourgeoisie was progressive, representing the interests of the country as a whole”. Similarly, Marx, comparing the English revolution of 1648 and the French revolution of 1789, says, “They were not the victory of a particular class of society over the old political order; they were the proclamation of the political order for the new European society... these revolutions expressed the needs of the whole world.” How does that perspective — that the revolutionary transformation of the 17th and 18th century expressed the interests of the whole of society, and indeed the whole world — relate to this idea that its progressive character was partial and contradictory, expressing a limited class interest?

JR: There are two senses in which that is answerable. First, every revolution, certainly in its initial phases — Engels makes this point — represents the vast majority of the society against an isolated ruling clique. That was true in every revolution you care to mention. The existing ruling class lost the ability to command wider support in society and was extraordinarily isolated. The 11 years of personal rule (1629-1640) made that clear in the case of Charles I. I open my book with the period in which he is losing control of London and Parliament, which is just one of those moments. There is the sense of a class alliance stretching from the richer merchants and moderate parliamentarians down through the plebeian classes, to an extent, mobilised against the old order.

Then there is a broader historical question about whether the society is going to become modern and capitalist or be thrown back to feudal patterns. That is what I think Marx is referring to when he talks about the interests of the whole world. It is in the interests of the whole world, including, actually, the labouring classes. If you want to play the old child’s game, “Which period of history would you like to live in?,” as an oppressed and exploited individual, you would probably take living in modern Dagenham over living in a feudal village in the 17th century. In that sense there is broad historical progress, but it is never without cost. It is not a classless society, nor is it without exploitation and oppression, which occur in different forms. In that sense you have to describe it as a contradictory and contested process, and not just the Whig ascent.

EC: The idea that the new society is not classless raises a contentious aspect of the historiography of the 17th century, namely to what extent there is a separate class interest within the parliamentary movement, and specifically whether there is a “working class,” however defined. Eduard Bernstein, in his book *Cromwell and Communism* (1895) — part of Kautsky’s series on “precursors to modern socialism” — argues that in 17th century England, “an industrial proletariat in the modern sense of the word did not exist.” This leads him to say of the Levellers, “they do not constitute a class movement. They are the extreme Left of the middle-class republican [or]... democratic party.” What do you make of Bernstein’s argument? How do you approach this issue of class interests in the 17th century?

JR: Bernstein is right about the working class. There are people working for wages then, but they are a much lower percentage of the society than they are today. They were not urbanised, they were not in large collective workplaces, and they had no organization and distinct political consciousness. In any modern sense, you can put that aside. But they are not unimportant. At times, sections of them even form an independent force in the Clubmen movement,² which just wanted to be left alone to get on with working, but they don’t have an effective political programme that can address the national crisis sweeping society. Where there are elements of collective organisation, you see exactly the weakness that Bernstein is pointing to.

Then there is the question of locating the Levellers. They were part of a much broader spectrum of people, who were described and described themselves as “the middling sort,” distinct from wage labourers, vagabonds, servants and peasants, who still formed a huge chunk of the society, and distinct from court monopolists, very rich merchants, courtiers and the landed aristocracy. The middling sort are also called the “well affected,” a term which meant the same in the English revolution as the word “citizen” did in the French revolution. To delineate them religiously, they were Puritans. They were the centre of the opposition to the court.

As today, being a middling sort implies internal gradations, so there are inevitably problems of definition at the fringes. Bernstein is right that the Levellers are part of that broad alliance, but in the quote that you read, he does not point to their distinctiveness, which is important. Nearly all of their leaders are former apprentices — second sons, who will not inherit

land — and religious radicals. There are very clear sociological markers, not absolutely unique to them, but distinguishing them from the broader spectrum of the middling sort in some very important ways. There are distinct economic and sociological elements locating them at a particular point in that class. They are also distinct from others in politics and organization. Everybody knows this: their enemies in the middling sort and among the royalists know it, and refer to them in this way; and they know it and refer to themselves in this way too.

EC: While you focus on how the Levellers distinguished themselves through their methods of organization, Bernstein distinguishes them here as “the extreme Left.” “The Left” is another term specific to bourgeois revolutions, emerging in the French revolution — it would make no sense to apply it to the War of the Roses, for example.

JR: It is reasonably apt here, I think.

EC: What does “the Left” mean in the context of the English revolution?

JR: The Levellers have a programmatic commitment to democracy. Importantly, the leading parliamentarian political figures of the middling sort don’t have that, or only have it periodically and opportunistically. The Levellers develop a written programme in which democracy is absolutely central. That is where the divide comes under the republic: a parliamentary, but military republic under Cromwell, or a democratic republic with a democratic popular mandate under the Levellers. That is the origin of modern Left politics. That’s where it all starts. There is a lot else that comes later, but if you trace it back, there is not a lot previous to the Levellers, politically, ideologically and organizationally.

EC: You identified the Left with democracy. To what extent is the Left about history?

JR: In what sense?

EC: In the sense of historical possibilities.

JR: If you want a brief definition of modern, i.e. Marxist, socialism, it would be, or could be said to be democracy extended into the realm of the economy. Parliamentary and bourgeois democracy is democracy excluded from the realm of the economy and socialism is democracy extended into the realm of the economy. You can see what a touchy subject that was in the Putney debates. That is exactly what Ireton and Cromwell react to: if you give the poor the vote, they will use it to take property off the rich. Ireton says that all he has is “an eye to property,” and you can’t have people who do not have property voting. That is the entirety of the debate at Putney. Every time Jeremy Corbyn mentions nationalization, you get the same reaction. It is one of the great continuities. It is the unanswered question at Putney, and it is still the central question.

EC: To push on this question of property, Bernstein has a chapter called “Communists and Atheist Tendencies in the Leveller Movement,” which gets at what is programmatically different about the Levellers. He argues there that such “proposals are all in harmony with the nascent capitalist system, the idea stressed that inventions which tend to increase production are bound to improve the situation of the poorer classes.” To what extent is the Levellers programme and their social aims coherent with the emergence of free civil society, of bourgeois society? You mentioned earlier that for the Levellers, small property holding was taken for granted. Does that trouble this distinction between Cromwell and the Levellers in the Putney debates over the question of property?

JR: No, because it emerges not in that form, but as a question of what the effect of democracy will be. If pushed — though I can’t recall a moment where they are pushed to state it like this — the logical Leveller answer would be that we can have democracy and private property. These are all essentially apprentices, freemen, small artisans, etc. They rail against the court monopoly, against which the emergence of private property and free markets is a progressive move. I think Hill puts this brilliantly in *The Century of Revolution*: in the 17th century, you washed with monopoly soap, you drank monopoly beer, your pots and pans were made by monopoly copper makers and books were a monopoly of the Stationers’ Company. Everything you touched was a monopoly and, ultimately, a court monopoly, because they derived from royal charters. Having lived so long with the history of free markets, it is hard to imagine a totally controlled, state and court-dominated economic structure, but that is what they faced. The Levellers railed against the existence of monopolies in the name of the ability of people like them to just finish their trade and produce stuff, without court approval and membership of the livery companies. It doesn’t seem like it to us, because we know the end of the story, but that is a step towards human freedom compared with the feudal structures. For the Levellers, democracy and free markets were not opposites but correlates.

In that sense they are not wrong to think that this will benefit everybody, and it certainly can be portrayed that way. However, a lot of Leveller rhetoric exceeds those parameters. When Thomas Rainsborough says at Putney, “the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live, as the greatest he,” he does not just mean small producers there. “The poorest he” is not the small producers, but the masterless men, the vagrants, the people pushed off the commons and people in prison for debt, in whose favour the Levellers constantly speak. Like many bourgeois revolutionary movements, they appeal to the masses below them socially, in order to mobilize them against the old order, and they probably aren’t aware of the incipient contradiction between the emergence of free markets and this project. They don’t think that this is going to create a mass working class that is exploited and oppressed; they don’t see that. That contradiction doesn’t exist for them. Overthrowing that old court-monopoly-dominated order is a step towards human freedom, albeit not the kind of liberation that perhaps the Levellers imagined it would be.

EC: To what extent are the social aims of the Levellers and Cromwell compatible?

JR: They are certainly compatible. They part company over how extensive enfranchisement will be and whether, when push comes to shove, enfranchisement is necessary at all. For Cromwell, parliamentary sovereignty is necessary, even under the military republic. He sustains that view to the point where he refuses the crown, which is a decision in favour of parliamentary rule, however *rumpified*³ and curtailed,

and against the return of monarchy.

EC: In the Putney debates, did the Levellers see enfranchisement as a necessary condition for freedom — to be able to produce themselves freely in society? Does the idea that “the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live, as the greatest he” necessitate enfranchisement through the state, or is there a concept of freedom in civil society which doesn’t at that time necessitate universal suffrage, as we perceive it looking back?

JR: I think they took it all as a piece. I don’t think the idea of civil society would have meant much to them in those terms. Legal freedom, which we might now partially equate with the conditions of civil society, was important, but if you offered Lilburne jury courts and the right to expression, but not the vote, it would not have been an acceptable situation. However, that was acceptable to some radicals. The republic did that to a certain extent, but it did not involve a democratic polity, so Lilburne and Overton rejected it. That’s why they ended up in the Tower [of London].

EC: Why were Cromwell and Ireton opposed to extending the franchise?

JR: For the reasons given at Putney: they thought that extending the franchise to non-property-holders would destabilise the state, lead to mob rule and the levelling of estates, and was a kind of “communist threat.”

EC: Not long after the Putney debates, there is an argument about whether to dissolve Parliament after Pride’s purge. When discussing this, Bernstein defends Cromwell’s position: “It must, however, be admitted that Cromwell was right and that the time for the dissolution of Parliament had not arrived. The elements hostile to the Independents and the Army were too numerous to risk the experiment of a new election... [Cromwell] was the practical politician par excellence,” whereas “the hour of the class for which they [the Levellers] fought had not yet struck.” Later, he remarks: “To extend the suffrage to the agricultural labourers would, in the then circumstances, have strengthened the reactionary party.” There is a political question there.

JR: That is a possible result. Really, we are looking at how revolutions — Engels makes this point — stretch the elastic of the possible to its fullest extent, so they are almost bound to recoil. We are discussing how that recoil happens. Nobody is in charge of it; it is an outcome of political battles, essentially the battle between the Levellers and the Independents. It is probably true that the republic stood on too narrow a social base to last for very long, so we are discussing how the republic dies. It might be true that it would have died anyway under the Levellers, but it would have died better; it would have died as a democratic experiment, not as a period of military rule that collapses in on itself. Perhaps the historical possibilities are either an experimental democratic republic, which echoes down the ages, or the military republic that we actually had under Cromwell, which still had a historical charge — “The good old cause” echoed in America and in France — but is a less clear historical precedent as a republic than the Leveller version might have been. We are moving into the area of speculation here, but if you approach it not as a closed issue or inevitability, but as an open possibility, as Bernstein raises it, then that would be a better formulation than endorsing Cromwell’s version as the only historical possibility.

EC: There is an echo of that idea, which you attributed to Engels, of revolutions throwing up forces that exceed the boundaries of that revolution, leading to a recoil, in Trotsky’s discussion of the English revolution in *Where is Britain Going?* He says, “A fool, an ignoramus or a Fabian can see in Cromwell only a personal dictatorship... Under Cromwell’s leadership the revolution acquired all the breadth vital for it. In such cases as that of the Levellers, where it exceeded the bounds of the requirements of the regenerate bourgeois society, Cromwell ruthlessly put down the ‘lunatics’... The revolutionary realist, Cromwell, was building a new society.” What do you think of Trotsky’s argument and how does it relate to this question of what is politically possible?

JR: Trotsky’s formulation is a slightly more rhetorical version of Bernstein’s point. I get the point. This is how the bourgeois revolution turned out, and we want to defend the achievements of the bourgeois revolution and the revolutionary leadership from their detractors. In broad terms and in relatively general articles, that is what they are doing. I think, if you examine it more closely, that the kind of framework I am talking about is important. They are dealing with an attitude towards finished events, but we are discussing what the possibilities might have been at any particular point in time. I don’t think it is particularly sensible to refer to the Levellers as ‘lunatics’. Is that in quotation marks?

EC: Yes, although he doesn’t necessarily reject the description.

JR: I think the quotation marks suggest that for Cromwell they were a lunatic fringe, not that Trotsky is necessarily endorsing that. Those comments are working in a different register and for different purposes than the kind of more detailed discussion that we were having.

EC: Earlier, you mentioned that the Leveller programme, the *Agreement of the People*, probably doesn’t have the social base to hold up in the 1640s and 50s, but many similar things do seem possible in the American and French revolutions a century later. If those ideas were almost utopian in the mid-17th century, when did that stop being the case?

JR: This is why this discussion is quite important. I think it didn’t have the social base, but I don’t think it was far off being politically actionable. It is very interesting that the final version of the *Agreement of the People* is accepted by Parliament, albeit the Rump Parliament, but then it is put aside. There were other versions, the so-called “Officers’ Agreement” and Jubbes version, etc. Those ideas aren’t actioned and probably couldn’t have been sustained, but it is not that far from their minds either: Cromwell and Ireton are opposed to it at Putney, but they are palpably engaged with it, because the forces that are raising it are quite significant. As always happens, activists invent ideas under the pressure of events and then they become part of an accepted political vision. With the Levellers’ ideas, John Locke codifies them, so it is not surprising that they become the intellectual mainstay of subsequent revolutions.

EC: Locke is often considered the philosopher or theorist of the Glorious Revolution (1688-89). If the Levellers were politically successful in the 1640s and 50s, and had led to a “better death” of the republic, as you put it, what would that mean for 1688? Is 1688 a revival of the republic, which collapsed with the restoration in 1660? If Leveller ideas are picked up in John Locke, how does the period we are discussing relate to the Glorious Revolution?

JR: The heavy lifting is done by the civil war, the revolution and the republic. That is the volcanic explosion. These are the aftershocks, where the society has a continual series of adjustments to what it is willing to institutionalize out of the revolution, and what it is going to reject. Ultimately, the Stuart monarchy is rejected, and a very different monarchical regime is accepted, but essentially it is the beginnings of a constitutional monarchy and parliamentary sovereignty. It is true that the monarchy is restored, which is a counterrevolution, no doubt, but it is restored under very different circumstances. It is always interesting that the Declaration of Breda, Charles II’s manifesto for returning, said “I’m only going to punish seven people.” The entire country had been convulsed for 20 years and these are the people who executed his dad. When they actually get into power and the Cavalier Parliament returns, many more than seven are punished, but the opening bid is very restricted. There is some good recent historiography on this. The royalists are keen not to relive the debates of the 1640s and 1650s, but to move on.

EC: In recent historiography, one book that stands out is Steven Pincus’ *1688: The First Modern Revolution*, which was reviewed in *The Platypus Review* by David Black, a historian associated with the Marxist Humanists. He argues: “By the time William was finally confirmed as a de jure as well as de facto constitutional monarch, the program of James Harrington had been largely fulfilled. Left historians’ dismissal of the Glorious Revolution on the grounds that it did not reopen the Leveller debate over extended and universal suffrage misses the point that Commonwealth radicals such as Harrington in the 1650s, much like the radical Whigs of the 1680s and 1690s, saw the popular content of the state as less important than the subjection of the state to civil society and the rule of law.” This goes back to the earlier question about suffrage and the freedom of civil society.

JR: What you get is parliamentary sovereignty, but parliamentary sovereignty isn’t the same as democracy. Parliament was, until way later, a collection of landowners and businesspeople. The debate is about the rule of law and the subjection of the monarchy to parliamentary sovereignty. The new ruling class wants political power; it does not want to be troubled with the old order. It wants to subjugate the monarchy to its will as expressed in a parliament of landowners and businesspeople. This is why suffrage is a huge question for the working-class movement and any radical movement from then on, from John Wilkes through to the Chartists and the Suffragettes, until we finally get universal suffrage in 1928. So Black is right to say that. But what does civil society mean? What are we talking about? It’s not really a Marxist term. Civil society disguises certain forms of class rule. What are we talking about with that form of class rule? That is what I’m getting at. We are talking about parliamentary sovereignty, which in this case institutionalizes the particular deal that was done as a result of the revolution between the landed aristocracy and the emerging, eventually industrial, bourgeoisie.

EC: Democracy, then, seems like the political thread between the advent of constitutional monarchy and the emergence of the working class as a political force with the Chartists. In Marx and Engels’ article “England’s 17th century Revolution” (1850), reviewing Guizot’s history of the English revolution, they criticize Guizot for confusing and conflating the 19th and the 17th centuries. Universal suffrage is one of those issues that is specific to the 19th century. Why do Marx and Engels emphasise this point of not conflating the 19th and 17th centuries?

JR: Well, it is probably not sensible to double guess exactly what Marx and Engels were thinking, but I would have thought they were referring to the nascent bourgeois revolutionary experience being very different from the radical and parliamentary opposition in the 19th century — not to confuse the original revolutionary explosion with later elements of parliamentary reform. I guess that they are saying don’t try to dress up much more moderate and, in some cases, middle-class elements, who are interested in parliamentary reform in the 19th century, with people who, to quote Lilburne, fought it out with “Swords point, and to the Butt end of the Musket,” in the civil war.

EC: So how has the question of democracy changed?

JR: Well, it becomes bifurcated. There is a middle-class reform movement which is interested in wider middle-class participation in Parliament. That is one debate. Then there is a much more explosive debate about universal suffrage and the enfranchisement of the working class, both between the working-class movement and the middle-class reformers, as well as within Chartism, which has a kind of moderate-radical split.

EC: Is that bifurcation present in the 17th century, or only in the 19th century?

JR: I suppose you could say the Putney debates are a precursor to that, but between those two points the working class has emerged, and that is a pretty critical question. Drawing an uncomplicated line of descent would probably be unwise.

EC: In your description of the Levellers there is something familiar about their type of Left-wing organisation and activity, organising activists and being on the fringes of society. In a way, given the state of the Left, it is easier for us to imagine the Levellers in the 17th century, than it is for us to imagine a mass socialist party, something like the German Social-democratic Party at its height. Why do you think that is?

JR: I’m not sure that is the case. Corbyn’s Labour party is suddenly a much more mass institution than it was before. It is very dominant in the mood of the labour movement and closely allied to the trade unions. That is a formation probably closer to the SPD than we have been for a very long time. Outside of revolutionary periods, the far Left will always have something of that characteristic. You are right, when writing the book, some aspects of what they are doing — petitioning and printing — struck me. Funnyly enough, the internet age has reproduced those practices. When I entered politics,

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there wasn’t as much petitioning as there is now. There wasn’t a No. 10 website⁴. The Levellers would have recognised both the existence of that and the ability of the authorities to do nothing about it, if they didn’t want to. Julian Assange banged-up for leaking government documents would not have been a surprise to them.

So, there are parallels, but I am slightly careful with this business. These were also intensely religious people and it takes a lot of emersion in the history to get your head round that. Perhaps, if you are close to the Muslim community, there is an element of that, but you would struggle to find people on the Left who could feel sympathy very much for Robert Overton debating the mortality of the soul to a thousand people in Spitalfields. That is a pretty strange activity.

EC: Do you think the religious aspect of the 17th century can be separated from its politics?

JR: No. While, organizationally, you feel the distance between us and them is very narrow, that is a big difference. But there are places in the world where you would be very well armed by working to understand how religious and political motivations interact. We are not living in quite as secular an age as people like to believe sometimes, but in Britain, I think you have to work hard to understand how intertwined those things were. The easiest way to understand it is that the Church of England was performing the functions of a landowner, a tax gatherer, a censor, an educationalist and a media outlet. Therefore, if you were in dispute with the Church, you weren’t just arguing over theological niceties, you were arguing about how society was run. So, the institutional side of it is easier to get your head round; the fact that that is inevitably mixed with actual theological debates is more difficult.

EC: In parts of the Muslim world today, politics and religion seem tied up in a similar way. Some on the Left might say that the religious expression is just a cover, and what is actually important is the political content. Do you think that in those contemporary cases politics and religion can be separated?

JR: I think that is true, but crude. Politics is inevitably bound up with religion, but for religious people those religious terms are important. You couldn’t just say to a Hamas activist, “What you are really interested in is national liberation, and can’t we just put aside all this stuff about Allah?” Even if the original statement is true and it is a national liberation movement, it is a national liberation movement in a different ideological construction than a secular one and, while you don’t have to agree with that, you have to take it seriously.

EC: I guess the point is that we are familiar with a religious aspect in right-wing politics today, but how does it relate to the Left?

JR: Well, as I say, there are a lot of national liberation movements that, certainly in the Arab world, have that characteristic. You have to take that seriously. It is not the end of the discussion, but if you don’t take the division between Sunni and Shia seriously in the Middle

East, you aren’t going to get very far.

EC: My last question is about the memory of the English revolution. We have discussed the influence of the English revolution on the American and French revolutions. I came across this anecdote from John Adams’ diaries where he visits Edgehill and Worcester⁵ with Thomas Jefferson. Adams writes: “Edgehill and Worcester were curious and interesting to us, as scenes where freemen had fought for their rights. The people in the neighbourhood appeared so ignorant and careless at Worcester, that I was provoked and asked, ‘And do Englishmen so soon forget the ground where liberty was fought for? Tell your neighbours and your children that this is holy ground; much holier than that on which your churches stand. All England should come in pilgrimage to this hill once a year.’ This animated them, and they seemed much pleased with it. Perhaps their awkwardness before might arise from their uncertainty of our sentiments concerning the civil wars.” There is this sense already towards the end of the 18th century that the memory of the English revolution has gone subterranean. What happened to that memory and how do we stand in relation to it today?

JR: It is fundamentally a product of the restoration of the monarchy. In the restored monarchy, the memory of republicanism and the radical republicans is suppressed. That is the difference in the way in which the memory is recorded here. In America, the revolution is part of the national curriculum. In France, the revolution is a big part of the national curriculum from an early age. In Britain, you can only study it as one part of one option at A-level, and there is no official memorialization. If you go to America, the sites of the revolution are national monuments. We tried to drive a motorway through the battlefield of Naseby. Winston Churchill twice tried to name a battleship Cromwell, but the monarchy simply vetoed that idea. Therefore, the revolution in this country is a very intermittent signal, which is transmitted, essentially unofficially, by the Left, by the trade union and labour movement, by artists, by people who have simply become fascinated by it and by historians, but all outside of any official memorialization. That is the condition we are in. When I wrote this book, there had been no book on the Levellers, partly as a result of revisionism, since Brailsford in 1975.

But you are right that, even though it is an intermittent transmission, the force of that is huge. Of course, Thomas Jefferson was distantly related to Lilburne and for generations there was a male child in the Jefferson family whose middle name was Lilburne. The estate in Virginia was called Edgehill. There was a very strong connection with America. Two of the regicides, Edward Whalley and William Goffe, were hidden in America by colonists and the writ for them by Charles II could never be fulfilled, because they could never be captured. There were women in the back roads of New England christening their children Oliver in the American revolution after Cromwell. Edward Sexby is sent off to France and translates the *Agreement of the People* into French. The revolt in Bordeaux is the first where the red flag is used as a symbol. If you work hard enough you can find those forms of transmission. Edward Legon’s new book, *Revolution Remembered: Seditious Memories after the British Civil Wars*, teases out how that sort of process

worked, verbally as well as in written materials. I believe that John Witkes owned original Lilburne pamphlets.

EC: Considering the importance of the American and French revolutions for the Chartists and for Marx, the memory goes through the international bourgeois revolution and comes back to England via America and France under the conditions of the 19th century.

JR: Exactly. It is very important to get the international thing. If you just look at the revolution in the national frame, you would miss the most important repercussions.

Postscript

As we were speaking, Boris Johnson, the British Prime Minister, announced that he was going to prorogue Parliament, to suspend its session for five weeks. Johnson’s decision, largely, it is thought, is intended to scupper plans by MPs to stop him delivering Brexit, come what may, on 31 October. I wrote to John Rees later that day to get his thoughts on the current political crisis in the light of our discussion of the English revolution. What follows is my questions to Rees and his response, which initially appeared as an opinion piece in The Guardian on 29 August, and a slightly edited version of which is reproduced here with permission of the author. – EC

EC: Boris Johnson argues that prerogation is needed to bring in a new legislative programme, correctly noting that this is the longest parliamentary session since the Long Parliament in the English civil war. While prerogation is constitutionally regular, in the current political climate of the Brexit crisis, some hear echoes of the dissolution of Parliament during the political crisis of the mid-17th century, usually comparing Johnson to Charles I — although Cromwell purged and dissolved Parliament, too. Lindsey German of Counterfire has commented, “The last person who did this lost his head. That was back in the 1640s.” In the English revolution, Parliament was sometimes a tool for the revolution against the king and sometimes an obstacle to it, needing to be purged by revolutionary forces. While Brexiteers will claim that Johnson is defending the democratic mandate of the referendum against a recalcitrant Parliament seeking to stop Brexit, others will say that Johnson is attacking parliamentary democracy. The Left has also been split over whether to overturn the referendum and back Remain or support some sort of Brexit. The crisis of democracy seems to be a common symptom of the post-neoliberal realignment of capitalist politics. For example, in America, Donald Trump is seen simultaneously as a champion of democracy and its destroyer. Is Johnson comparable to Charles Stuart or Oliver Cromwell? Does the English revolution have anything to tell us about this moment? You said in our discussion that democracy defines the Left. Where does democracy lie in this political crisis? And how should the Left respond?

JR: While we might not be on the verge of an absolutist King Boris dictatorship, some deeper parallels are worth investigating. [The conflict between Charles I and Parliament] had been decades in the making and was detaching the court government from even its natural supporters among the gentry. The government of Boris

Johnson is indeed a court clique, unsecured from its natural moorings in the wider political establishment. Long before Johnson uttered his government’s expletive-laden two-word manifesto, “Fuck business”, it was clear that Brexit and big business were incompatible. The Tory party leadership, and hence the government, had been captured by a Brexit-obsessed minority of a minority. For the first time since the Tory party split over the Corn Laws in the mid-19th century, it was no longer the more-or-less united political representative of corporate Britain.

Here’s a second parallel with the pre-civil war political atmosphere: a strong sense that more talk is useless... There is a palpable sense that action is required, even action that breaks the bounds of the previously constitutionally acceptable. If Johnson’s court is seen to act decisively while their opponents look as if they are playing the old establishment game of manoeuvre, compromise and legalistic prevarication, it can appear that the court clique are the insurgents and the opposition is the establishment. When, after the 11-year dictatorship, Charles I was eventually forced to call parliaments again, there was a radical mood among MPs and an insurrectionary mood among the London crowd. Masses of Londoners gathered outside the Palace of Westminster, while inside, MPs, including those previously imprisoned by Charles, demanded both that the king’s advisers be put on trial for treason and that he grant effective parliamentary sovereignty.

As the crowds once again surge around Westminster, there may be a lesson there. In the 1640s, all previous political differences of the amassed opposition had to be subordinated to the aim of getting rid of Charles I’s regime... Today, both Johnson and his opponents lay claim to having the backing of the people – who truly does so is yet to be fully tested. But when democracy is imperilled, its salvation may depend on the public’s willingness to demand their rights. When it came down to it, the emerging democrats of the 17th century fought their autocratic foes under battle flags inscribed with the Latin tag ‘salus populi suprema lex’ — the safety of the people is the highest law. That may still be the most enduring lesson of the events of the 1640s. | **P**

- 1 The *Agreement of the People* (1647–49) was the principal constitutional manifesto associated with the Levellers.
- 2 Clubmen were bands of local defence vigilantes during the English Civil War who tried to protect their localities against the excesses of the armies of both sides in the war.
- 3 The Rump Parliament was the English Parliament after Colonel Pride purged the Long Parliament, on 6 December 1648, of those members hostile to the Grandees’ intention to try Charles I for high treason.
- 4 A website where you can petition the British Government.
- 5 Sites of important battles in the English civil war.

“On Stalinism”, cont. from page 2

realized the real nature of Stalinism and then simply remained in the communist party with some kind of cover.

SF: What did the collapse of the Soviet Union mean for the Left?

HT: It would have been better, of course, if the Soviet Union could have been converted into a socialist society, but that isn’t what happened. Given the lack of understanding of what the Soviet Union was and the influence of the Soviet Union in preventing the coming into existence of a genuine socialist party, the end of the Soviet Union was a step forward. I think that’s the only thing I can say. I don’t like saying that, but I can’t see any way around it. It was a step forward in that it removed a society in which you had what amounted to a form of exploitation and a particular form of ideological control which kept the world backwards, so the fact that it came to an end was a step forward. It would have been far better if instead of going into what amounted to an anarchic capitalism, they could have gone into a transition period towards socialism.

SF: Why couldn’t that happen?

HT: Well, the forces weren’t there for it. Part of the point of Stalinism, in its nature, was to atomize the working class. It had to do that to maintain itself in power. Obviously, if the working class were organized, it would have been able to develop its own thought, develop a theory, be Marxist, and potentially overthrow the system, so the only way they could deal with it was to atomize the population, so that the working class was atomized. They weren’t able to organize in the factory. They weren’t able to organize *anywhere*. You really couldn’t get any kind of organization except in certain circumstances and in certain far-away districts, like in Tajikistan — it was a very backward part of the Soviet Union, and it remained very, very largely agricultural until the end — they could discuss what they wanted, and in effect the Stalinist regime wouldn’t have cared what they were saying.

SF: So was 1989 a turn to the left, or why not?

HT: Yes, in principle it could have been a chance for the Left; there were a number of left-wing people. There were too few at the time. I remember speaking- by coincidence I happened to be speaking to Ernst Mandel about exactly that point — I remember it was around ’88, or ’89. He actually went to the Soviet Union at that time, and I discussed it with him. I was just very pessimistic about it; I didn’t see any force, and he said, “Just wait until I go there.” Obviously, he couldn’t do anything. I think Mandel expressed, really, the attitude that existed in the West, that really did think that there would be an uprising, the working class would be liberated and would be able to act — but it didn’t exist as a class, precisely because the regime’s aim was to see to it that it wasn’t a class. It needed a few more years to organize itself.

SF: What is the legacy of Stalinism today, thirty years after 1989?

HT: Well, unfortunately, its influence has remained to a limited degree, and, of course, we still don’t have power for a socialist party, but I’m sure it’ll come. Unfortunately, that’s one of its main legacies. I’m not certain that the Left has fully taken in the awful tragedy, a century of tragedy which it’s had to go through. The Left hasn’t fully understood why it’s been a hundred years in which the Left has been unable to develop, in which the world has not moved on.

SF: So how is Stalinism still with us today?

HT: Well, Marxism *is* with us today, and it’s in effect stronger than it has been, but the Soviet Union was the reason why we don’t have socialism, and why Marxism isn’t very much stronger than it is. One of the effects of the Soviet Union no longer being there, is that it’s no longer an embarrassment and an enemy of the Left, because it was actually an *enemy* of the Left, it wasn’t just an embarrassment, and the fact that it’s no longer there makes it much easier to be a Marxist, and it’s much easier for people who aren’t Marxist to see its strength. I’m surprised now that, when one actually reads comments, which — although they’re not Marxist, they’re critical of Marxism — are no longer talking the nonsense that they used to do when they attacked Marxism. If you read the *Economist*’s remarks on the 200th anniversary of Marx’s birth they are, of course, anti-Marxist, but the comments were at least reasonable, and not absolute nonsense, which they used to be. They showed that there was a respect for Marx which didn’t used to exist.

SF: When Stalinism was in power and when it was, as you stated, an obstacle to the Left, how was it treated by the Left as an obstacle?

HT: The problem was that Stalinism was much more powerful than the Left, so the only way that the Left could treat Stalinism was as you would a torturer or a madman or somebody who is out to kill you. Obviously, it would depend on the particular Stalinist grouping that you were dealing with, as to how you would deal with them. They aren’t — they *weren’t* all the same. Often enough you could find a Stalinist group where enough people in it understood the ambiguity in which they lived. Obviously, it was much more complex than how I’ve just put it.

SF: How was it more complex?

HT: In a Stalinist grouping, or group of people, or a study group, or a group of whatever kind, many people really didn’t know very much Marxism and they didn’t know much about the Soviet Union. Despite this, they simply accepted the official line that the Soviet Union was socialist, it was defending them, and that it was a wonderful society, so their ordinary actions could be perfectly reasonable in relation to whatever it was. So supposing somebody who was a Trotskyist or a left-

winger would approach them and ask if they could do something or other together, I imagine they could work together. In many instances that wouldn’t be true, if there were any sort of controls of whatever, and the same would apply to particular groups or subdivisions and so on. Of course there are examples of people in Eastern Europe who, as mentioned by Isaac Deutscher, ended up in positions of power, and who knew exactly what was going on, knew what Stalinism was, and simply, being themselves in power, did their best to help alleviate or make things easier for people. In that sense it’s complex. It would be very difficult for most people who are honest to know how to act. If you were in the system itself, and you were living well within it, and you knew that if you said the wrong word you would fall flat, you would fall right down to the bottom, or might even end up in prison, you might not do anything. Or you could simply accept what was going on, or you could close your ears to it, but not everybody did. | **P**

Edited by Michael Woodson. Transcribed by Michael D. Atkinson.

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- 3 See: <https://soundcloud.com/platypus-affiliated-society/ep-19-on-tarantino-the-uaw-corruption-scandal-and-stalinism-in-power/>

“A shipwrecked society”, cont. from page 2

“A squatting child full of sadness releases
A boat as fragile as a May butterfly.
No longer can I, bathed in your languor, o waves,
Follow in the wake of the cotton boats,
Nor cross through the pride of flags and flames,
Nor swim under the terrible eyes of prison ships.”²¹
| **P**

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On Stalinism

An interview with Hillel Ticktin

Sophia Freeman

*Following Hillel Ticktin’s presentation at the Communist Party of Great Britain’s annual Summer University, “Predicting the Collapse of the Soviet Union,” Sophia Freeman interviewed Hillel Ticktin on the phenomena of Stalinism. The interview coincides with the 2019 Platypus Summer Reading group: “Thirty years of 1989: What was Stalinism in Power?”,¹ and an article — of the same title— published by Rory Hannigan in PR 119.² What follows is an edited transcript of the conversation, which originally aired on episode 19 of the Sh*t Platypus Says Podcast.³*

Sophia Freeman: I’m here with Hillel Ticktin, who recently gave a talk at this year’s Communist Party of Great Britain’s annual Communist University. His talk was entitled “Predicting the Collapse of the Soviet Union,” and this will feature in the interview. The interview also coincides with the Summer Reading Group that we do as part of the Platypus Affiliated Society, and this year it was around thirty years, in nineteen eighty-nine, “What was Stalinism in Power?” and also, just recently, a member of the Platypus Affiliated Society, Rory Hannigan, has published an article titled “What was Stalinism in power?” in Platypus Review 119, reflecting on the reading group. Thanks for joining us, Hillel Ticktin. If you could just kindly introduce yourself.

Hillel Ticktin: I was born in South Africa. I was politically active and had to leave in 1960. I came to Britain and then it was a time of some confusion — quite a few people had to leave South Africa, and then there were a number of scholarships up. Since I got a scholarship from the Soviet Union I went to the Soviet Union, and for the next almost five years I was in the Soviet Union, first in Kiev where I learned Russian, and then I went to Moscow University where I was doing what was the equivalent of a PhD in the Department of Political Economy. Thereafter, I came to Britain, and ended up as a lecturer and, in my last years, as a professor. My official title was “Professor of Marxist Studies.”

SF: And does that department still exist, or do those courses still exist?

HT: No. The title doesn’t exist, and we formed a kind of sub-department. It was a center for social theory of movements, that center exists but has been downgraded.

SF: And have you been involved formally on the Left?

HT: From 1970, for about eighteen months, I belonged to the predecessor to the Socialist Workers’ Party, but that’s really about all I belonged to.

SF: What kind of political project was Stalinism?

HT: To call it a project implies that it was deliberate. Clearly, it wasn’t deliberate. It came into being, as we know, with the assumption of Stalin to power in the Soviet Union in 1923, and his full power, I suppose, was when he expelled Trotsky in 1927. So, from 1927 until his death, there was a fully Stalinist regime. By fully Stalinist I mean a regime in which terror played an absolutely crucial role, which was governed from above. In the case of Stalinism, it was actually led by Stalin. One has to say that, by the late thirties, Stalin was in full control; there was no sharing of power. He had to a large degree wiped out the Left, certainly, and to a large degree wiped out the intelligentsia and a great deal of the middle layers. He was more or less governing by himself. He had a few assistants who were afraid of him; it’s hard to say that anybody else really played anything other than a tertiary role. Stalinism, therefore, as it came into being, was a system which had a number of functions. Firstly, it defeated the socialist project put forward by Lenin and Trotsky quite effectively over time. It completely wiped it out. As we know, the personnel were of course killed. I don’t think you can over-estimate the nature of that terror. The fact is that millions were killed. The actual numbers are still not fully agreed. The KGB came up with a figure of 750,000 killed in the purges. Robert Conquest, I think, comes up with twelve-million. I don’t know if anybody knows the exact number, but what we do know is that millions were, in fact, killed. This is unprecedented in human history. We know of the examples of Tamerlane killing millions; Genghis Khan; Julius Caesar; but they weren’t killed on the basis of ideas, on the basis that they might not support a regime. This was entirely different: it was a deliberate decision to ensure that the upper layer within the Soviet Union remained in power.

SF: If I could try and pull the view out a bit, and address it maybe from another angle: so, what kind of failure was Stalinism a reaction or accommodation to, and how did that determine its nature?

HT: Stalinism was a completely new entity in human history. After all, it was based on the taking of power by the Bolshevik party, it was based on the taking of power by the Left. The aim of the Left was to introduce a socialist society. I think they were completely genuine, and they began the process. Unfortunately, they, of course, were invaded by the West, and they had to deal with the aftermath of the First World War as well, so that it never really got beyond the very initial point. Trotsky makes the point that the result of the Social Democrats not taking power in the name of socialism in Germany meant that the world had entered a transitional period. In other words, the world had entered a transition to socialism, a *global* transition to socialism. What Stalinism represented was a counterrevolution in this process. What Stalinism did was to stop that transition from going in a regular form. But the world is in a transition because it has to move.

SF: How was the phenomena of Stalinism stopping the world moving through transition?

HT: Immediately, it stopped the transition through a system of terror: it wiped out the Left. In the long term, it wiped out any hope, as it were, of going to socialism, because who on earth would want such an awful entity at all? Nobody would actually want it.

SF: How is Stalinism a counterrevolution for you?

HT: Firstly, it’s a counterrevolution because it wiped out the Left. The flower of the Bolshevik party was effectively killed. Secondly, it’s a counterrevolution because it did not stand for socialist goals. Thirdly, it’s a counterrevolution because its theory is simply a nonsense.

SF: Now I want to bring Trotsky into the picture a bit more. So the Left, after the failure of the World Revolution, fell into the Stalinophilic and Stalinophobic camps, whilst Trotsky attempted to uphold a dialectical critique. For Trotsky, Stalinism was an accommodation to the defeat of the World Revolution — Stalin called defeat a “victory.” The Soviet regime was one of crisis management, wherein the official state ideology and the social reality of its citizens were in stark contradiction. How was Trotsky attempting to stay true to Marxism after the failure of world revolution?

HT: It would be extremely difficult for any person in his position. Firstly, because he clearly didn’t expect what had happened. Nobody expected it. And nobody expected the depth of the terror, and I think even Trotsky didn’t realize the full depth of it. It was very difficult for him to be able to understand where it was going. Like most people, and like most Marxists, he was optimistic, and hoping that things would change. There wasn’t anything that he could do with it, because he was completely cut off, so the only way in which he could act would be to help people in the West. But in the West he was effectively cut off too: he was exiled to Mexico and

effectively expelled from France, Norway, and so forth, so the only way in which Trotsky could have an effect was in terms of what he was writing.

SF: What do you mean by Trotsky’s optimism, or how would you characterize that?

HT: There was, as you know, a continuous battle over whether the Soviet Union still was a workers’ state. He kept insisting that it was a workers’ state. I think we can now say, having seen its whole history, that there’s no sense in calling it a worker’s state. The workers were not in power and they couldn’t be in power, and any attempt was met ruthlessly, so there was no way that was the case. There was no control from below whatsoever.

SF: So, for Trotsky, Stalinism is an accommodation to the defeat or the failure of the revolution; still, it was a contradictory phenomenon that pointed beyond itself and required an immanent dialectical critique, which he tried to uphold.

HT: It’s not that Stalinism pointed beyond itself. It’s true that within the Stalinist regime they were teaching Marx. I was in the department of economics and I was studying Marx, so it’s true that people were studying Marx. They didn’t necessarily want capitalism at that time, but it was very difficult to see how you were going to get to a genuine socialist regime. There were even occasional anarchists. When the Soviet Union came to an end, the strongest group which was at least to the left, because there was very little socialism, were anarchists. I did meet that kind of person at that time.

SF: You mentioned in your talk at the Communist University that during this period of Stalinism when you were living in Russia, Stalinism had killed the revolutionary history and memory and that people were repeating Lenin without meaning. What did you mean by that?

HT: Well, Lenin was taught in the Soviet Union. They’d be taught “What is to be Done?” and they would have to write essays, or they’d have to repeat it back. They would do that but they wouldn’t understand what they were doing. There was no atmosphere of socialism of any kind. It was a backward society. You actually had queues of people standing at Academy of Sciences to be given whatever for producing a machine of perpetual motion. Now, that’s impossible, but there were queues of people claiming that they’d invented it. What kind of society is it where that happens? It’s a society which is cut off from the rest of the world, cut off within itself.

SF: So is there anything redeemable about Stalinism?

HT: No, I don’t think there’s anything redeemable about Stalinism. Stalinism wasn’t the same in every country. One could imagine a Stalinist party where some members — well, the leading members of the party

“On Stalinism” continues on page 4

The shipwrecked society

Jonathan Black

IN A SERVICE ECONOMY, where most workers are readily replaceable or completely superfluous, the old idea of wage claims arbitrated through the state is an increasingly hopeless proposition. The labor theory of value still holds but wages are artificially propped up, within definite limits,¹ to maintain the consumption of commodities, especially the consumption by the capitalist class of the wealth creating commodity labor-power [we need jobs and any jobs will do].^{2,3} Today a deepening of the interventionist state-craft of Keynesianism haunts the political imagination of the Left of the political class.⁴ If the ideology of neoliberalism could be broadly described as technocratic political solutions to social problems, then our Neo-Keynesians seem to fit the bill, attempting to use the dangerous, sickly gasps of the increasingly unrepresentative nation-state to insist on strengthening the executive of this outdated and degraded system of representation and administration or as Karl Marx aptly described, “this supernaturalist abortion of society.”⁵

Today the increasingly militarized state uses personalized and surveillance technology to lock the superfluous population into a techno-bureaucratic Kafkaesque nightmare. In Australia the suicide inducing Robodebt system acts as an impersonal weapon wielded to discipline the reserve labor army.^{6,7} The massively expanded prison population and renewed and expanded use of prison labor in the United States since the 70s is another example of this trend.⁸ Civil society, contrary to common narratives, still generally aspires to bourgeois notions of freedom despite the state becoming increasingly detached from such aspirations.⁹

Tracing political upheavals, fracturings or realignments today to emergent social forces turns Marx’s critique of Hegel’s naturalization of the state on its head.¹⁰ To be exact, tying political upheavals to society presupposes that social interests are represented and administered by the state in a meaningful way. The missing element in this formulation is the will of society [a mass social base of support]. Ignoring this element universalizes the common affairs of the increasingly self-interested managerial capitalist class as the common affairs of the whole of society. Today this approach, especially when applied to this or that election cycle, has led to both alarm and optimism from establishment and would-be anti-establishment members of the political class.¹¹

The hostility of the political class and the state to society is not new, but today the hostility’s openness might signify a deep fear that the feeling is becoming mutual. This fear is on stark display in the hysterical response by the political class, and their lackeys in the commentariat, to the perceived threat of “populism.” However, in spite of political crisis, society, with some notable but short lived exceptions, seems to be locked in the same stasis it

entered in the second half of the 20th century.

Theodor Adorno described the great stasis of our social relations in his essay, “Late Capitalism or Industrial Society” as such, “contemporary society exhibits, in spite of all assertions to the contrary, as its dynamism and increase of production, static aspects. These include the relations of production. These are no longer merely the property of the owner, but of the administration, all the way to the role of the state as total capitalist. To the extent that its rationalization converges with technical rationality, a.k.a. the productive forces, they’ve undeniably become more flexible. This has created the illusion that the universal interest has its ideal as the status quo and universal employment, not the liberation of heteronomous work.” Today the atomization of our social relations seems total and thus any hope of emancipation seems to have been permanently blocked. The ideological basis of the “populist” narrative is the prevailing common sense that *the last man* has indeed become so immersed in *the End of History*, that as such Herbert Marcuse’s one-dimensional men have now become so deranged, deplorable and outright dangerous that any new mass social movements emerging that champion freedom are impossible.¹²

For example, German philosopher Byung-Chul Han doesn’t believe in the possibility of a new emancipatory politics emerging today. Han proposes that the Deleuzian notion of a control society has morphed under neoliberal capitalism into a self-control society. As Han writes in his essay “Why revolution is no longer possible”: “Neoliberalism turns the oppressed worker into a free contractor, an entrepreneur of the self. Today, everyone is a self-exploiting worker in their own enterprise. Every individual is master and slave in one.”

What Han inadvertently provides here, through his blinkered Heideggerian take on “modernity,” is a fairly accurate trans-historical description of social relations under capitalism. Under capitalism “oppressed workers” have always been “entrepreneurs of the self” in that they sell the only commodity they own; namely their labor-power, which as Marx puts it, “has no other repository than human flesh and blood.”¹³ Social relations under capitalism, that is, social existence in bourgeois society, is the free competition of individuals attempting to sell their labor-power to the capitalist class. This basic social relation hasn’t changed. This freedom though, the free competition of labor-power, has become and is becoming increasingly degraded. Positing capitalism as an autonomous totality, as Han does, ignores the fundamental contradiction of our age: the rising tide no longer lifts all boats, it sinks them.

For the vast majority of people, their “boat” is their labor-power and with each new technical innovation in production the commodity labor-power is becoming

more and more worthless. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon accurately describes the resulting social relation of this contradictory existence as such, “the proprietor, like Robinson Crusoe on his island, wards off with pike and musket the proletariat washed overboard by the wave of civilization, and seeking to gain a foothold upon the rocks of property.

“Give me work!” cries he with all his might to the proprietor: “don’t drive me away, I will work for you at any price.”

“I do not need your services,” replies the proprietor, showing the end of his pike or the barrel of his gun.

“Lower my rent at least.” “I need my income to live upon.” “How can I pay you, when I can get no work?”

“That is your business.” Then the unfortunate proletariat abandons himself to the waves.”¹⁴

Today the working class are still buffeted about on the waves in their precarious little boats, their labor-power. The brutal reality of this precarious existence becomes ever more apparent as the storm clouds of crisis hover, ever present on the horizon, set to cyclically overturn the boats of even the more valuable workers.

As the commodity labor-power becomes increasingly superfluous, the alienated imperatives of capital become ever more invasive into the worker’s social existence. Whether it’s the aggressive anti-social competition between workers within any given firm, the vicious disciplining of the reserve labor army by the state, constant precarious re-skilling, the indifference or opposition by the capitalist class to workers being educated or even the pressure to turn hobbies into profit, what Marx called the social relations of production take a specific historical form relative to the forces of production. While the exact substance of the interpenetration of the relations and forces of production is historically specific this dynamic has always been central to capitalist production.

Marx describes the moving interplay between the relations and forces of capitalist production as historically developing first as formal and then as real subsumption. Under formal subsumption the labor process continues much as before but the means of production become monopolized as the property of the capitalist class. As capitalism necessarily develops the productivity of labor-power, it requires the real subsumption of the labor-process, that is, the subordination of the social individual to the specific ideal required by a highly productive labor process. Real subsumption dissolves previous social norms and beliefs (religious beliefs, cultural norms, gender relations, etc.) and sublimates them as Marx puts it to “a new relation of domination and subordination [and this also produces political, etc., expressions of itself].”¹⁵

As capitalism progresses the real subsumption of social relations to the labor process is ongoing, as is the expansion of wealth as capital. As Marx puts it, “capitalist production is not only the reproduction of the relation, it is its reproduction on an ever growing scale; and in the same proportion as the social productive power of labor develops, along with the capitalist mode of production, the pile of wealth confronting the worker grows, as wealth ruling over him, as capital, and the

world of wealth expands vis-à-vis the worker as an alien and dominating world.”¹⁶

Today, social and political discourse is overawed at the seeming supernatural totality of capitalist power. Self-described accelerationists on the Left and Right see the anti-human juggernaut of modern capitalism as a new opportunity. Byung-Chul Han as somewhat of an anti-accelerationist sees the atomization of our social relations as an irreversible and lamentable development. The pervasive common sense of capitalism as a seemingly insurmountable totality also manifests as the state absolutist identitarianism and nationalist Fordist nostalgia embodied by democratic socialism. In this malaise the diminished and seemingly endless task of what was the Left has been reduced to “consciousness raising,” which will supposedly result in the emergence of a pure (politically correct) revolutionary subject.¹⁷ All of these understandings misrecognize or ignore real subsumption as an ongoing, yet historically specific, symptomatic process arising from the interplay between forces and relations of production.

As Adorno clarified technological development is “only the image of human productivity itself, cybernetics and computers merely being an extension of the human senses: technical advancement is therefore only a moment in the dialectic between the forces of production and the relationships of production and not some third thing, demonically self-sufficient.”¹⁸

We live in an age of entropy where the self-contradiction of capitalist production slowly but continually erodes the social relation on which capitalism reproduces itself — wage labor. The appearance of late capitalism as an autonomous totality is only the ideological form it takes as it continually degrades the environment, the social individual and indeed its own arena of self-valorization. The impulse to either lament or celebrate capitalism as a unified totality hinders any potential of seeing society in motion and thus precludes the possibility of developing a predictive capacity that might be wielded by a new emancipatory politics. It also relegates the history of the failure of socialism to a litany of positive examples of what not to do rather than attempting to decipher the motivations and tactics of those locked in the perilous struggle for freedom. Moreover, being overwhelmed or nostalgic today indefinitely postpones the task we must undertake if we are to become free; organize ourselves to use politics to do away with politics as we know it, the state, so that we can *all* have access to work to do away with work as we know it. As such the productive forces will no longer work against the producers but for them. As Friedrich Engel’s explained, “the difference is as that between the destructive force of electricity in the lightning in the storm, and electricity under command in the telegraph and the voltaic arc; the difference between a conflagration, and fire working in the service of man.”¹⁹

The arrival of this non-linear process will not be achieved by a return to some idealized past or by the emergence of a pure subject but rather as Ernst Bloch put it, “the process is made by those who are made by the process.”²⁰ Well provisioned freedom and free-time has been and remains possible.

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